#1
ryo shirakome
illust. takayaki
ARIFURETA:
ARIFURETA SHOKUGYOU DE SEKAISAIKYOU
FROM COMMONPLACE
TO WORLD'S STRONGEST

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# Prologue

Light rapidly faded away as the darkness began to swallow him. Hajime Nagumo's face twisted in terror as he stared at the vanishing light above him. He desperately shot out his hand, grasping at the light he knew he could never truly grab hold of. He felt his nether regions tense up as he fell freely through the darkness.

The chasm he'd fallen into was so deep that it seemed almost as if he was falling down to the pits of hell. And the light he was staring at the portal to the world of the living. He'd fallen down a massive tear in the earth while he'd been exploring a dungeon. The hole was so deep that he kept falling long after the tiny pinprick of light had shrunk to nothing. His entire life flashed before his eyes, with nothing but the sound of wind rushing past accompanying his plunge to the hellish depths below.

Let us turn back the clock a bit and recount how a young Japanese boy found himself in a world that was far too cruel and heartless for the word 'fantasy' to be an accurate descriptor. After all, the harsh and unfair events he'd experienced, and was still experiencing, were a bit too bereft of the wonderful hopes and dreams one imagined when they heard the word fantasy.

Monday. Quite possibly the most depressing day of the week. Most people were, without a doubt, sighing heavily as they lamented the beginning of the week and the end of their glorious weekend. Hajime Nagumo was no exception. However, in his case, his depression was multiplied by the fact that school was not just a pain, but a veritable hell.

As always, Hajime barely managed to arrive just before the bell for first period rang. He somehow managed to steady his sleep-deprived body and opened the door to his classroom. He found himself on the receiving end of a multitude of scornful glares and annoyed tongue clicks from a majority of the male students as soon as he set foot in the classroom. None of the female students seemed all too pleased to see him either. It would have been fine were they simply ignoring him, but they too gave him stares of contempt.

Hajime did his best to ignore his classmates and went to his seat. But as always, there were a few students who couldn't resist the opportunity to needle him.

"Sup, you gross otaku! Stay up all night playing video games again? I bet you were playing porn games the whole time!"

"Wow what a creep. What kind of disgusting pervert stays up all night playing porn games?"

The boys all laughed, as if they found that statement somehow hilarious. The student who'd first called out to Hajime was Daisuke Hiyama, the ringleader of Hajime's tormentors. Daisuke never seemed to tire of teasing Haijme, as he went up to him on a daily basis. The ones who were laughing wickedly next to him were Yoshiki Saitou, Reichi Kondou, and Shinji Nakano. It was those four who'd always made Hajime's life miserable.

As Hiyama had stated earlier, Hajime was indeed an otaku. But he wasn't particularly ugly or obnoxious, so the moniker gross otaku hardly did him justice. His hair was cropped short and kept tidy. Plus, it wasn't as if he had a communication problem of any sort either. Sure, he wasn't the most talkative guy around, but he had no problem responding to people who talked to him. He was a quiet person overall, but not to the point where it could be considered gloomy. He just happened to have an interest in a very specific set of media—namely manga, novels, video games, and movies.

While it was true that public opinion of otakus hadn't been very positive as of late, at most being an otaku usually earned you a few looks, not that kind of targeted bullying. So why did all the male students hate Hajime so?

The answer was simple.

"Good morning, Nagumo-kun! You barely made it on time today too. I think you should at least make an effort to come earlier." One of the girls smiled softly as she walked up to Hajime. She was one of the few people in the whole school who treated him kindly, and also the reason everyone hated him.

Kaori Shirasaki, one of the most popular girls in school, and beautiful enough to be considered a goddess by many. She had sleek, black hair that went all the way down to her waist, and large shapely eyes filled with kindness. Her small

nose sat perfectly in between her eyes and her pink lips were the epitome of perfection.

She always seemed to have a smile on her face, and her knack for looking after others combined with her strong sense of responsibility made her one of the most respected students at Hajime's school. Moreover, she was tolerant and understanding to a fault, to the point where no one had ever even seen her look unhappy before.

And, for whatever reason, Kaori had taken an interest in Hajime. Most people assumed Hajime was a terrible student because he always slept in class due to his frequent all-nighters (in truth, he had pretty average grades). And, since Kaori was always looking after other students, they believed that was the reason she talked to him.

Had her overtures convinced Hajime to become a better student, or had he naturally been a better looking guy, the other kids might not have minded Kaori's interest in him as much. As it was, though, he was sadly as average looking as one could get, and his favorite motto was "hobbies over real life," so obviously his attitude toward school had shown no signs of improvement either. As it was, the other average looking male students of his class couldn't stand the fact that Hajime was so close to Kaori. "Why him and not us!?" they thought. Meanwhile, the other girls simply thought he was being rude to Kaori. They were unhappy that he wasn't even attempting to reform his habits.

"A-Ah, good morning, Shirasaki-san." Hajime's face stiffened up as he felt the bloodthirsty glares of his fellow classmates, and he awkwardly returned Kaori's greeting.

In contrast, Kaori smiled happily as she looked at him. *Why do you always look at me like that!?* Hajime despaired as he felt the gazes of his classmates burn into him.

Hajime was honestly bewildered. He didn't understand why the most beautiful girl in school cared about a guy like him. To him, it seemed like there had to have been something more than just her natural disposition to help others.

Of course, he wasn't so conceited as to believe she might possibly have any romantic interest in him. Hajime was well aware of the fact that he'd given up a

great deal of things to live a life fully devoted to his hobbies. He knew his appearance, grades, and athletic ability were all utterly average. There were a whole host of guys better than him who were far more suited to be her partner, even just among her acquaintances. Which was why he found her behavior so puzzling.

*Honestly, I just wish you'd realize you're the reason everyone hates me right now!* Hajime screamed inside his head. However, he didn't give voice to his thoughts. He knew that some of his classmates would no doubt drag him out behind the gym once classes were over if he ever dared to do so... The moment Hajime finished his conversation with Kaori, three new people walked up to them. They'd been watching the two of them like vultures, waiting for him to finish talking. Among this new group was of course one of the "better guys" who'd been mentioned previously.

"Good morning, Nagumo-kun. Must be rough staying up that late every day."

"Looking after him again, Kaori? You're really too nice for your own good."

"Seriously. Talking to a failure like him's a total waste of time."

The only person who'd greeted Hajime out of the three was Shizuku Yaegashi, Kaori's best friend. Shizuku's black hair was tied back in her trademark ponytail. Her almond-shaped eyes give her a rather sharp look, but deep within her gaze dwelled a kindness that made her seem cool rather than cold.

Standing 172 centimeters tall, she was a good deal taller than most of the other girls in his class. That, combined with her well-built body, made her seem like a dignified samurai. And samurai made for a rather apt analogy as her family actually ran a dojo that taught the Yaegashi style, and Shizuku herself was a peerless swordswoman who'd never lost a single kendo tournament. In fact, she'd been featured in magazines before and had a rather rabid fanbase. The press even took to calling her the modern samurai beauty. Many of the younger female students had started calling her onee-sama in an almost worshipping manner.

The guy who'd greeted Kaori with that rather cliched line about her kindness was Kouki Amanogawa. He was perfect in almost every way. Great at sports, handsome, and had outstanding grades to boot. Even his name sounded heroic.

Written with the characters for “light” and “radiance,” it gave off a rather dazzling impression.

He had flowing brown hair, soft features, stood 180 centimeters tall, and despite his slender frame still had noticeable muscles. He was kind to everyone he met, and had a strong sense of justice (or so he thought anyway.)

Like Shizuku, he’d attended the Yaegashi dojo since he was in elementary school and was skilled enough to have competed in national tournaments. He and Shizuku were childhood friends. Dozens of girls had fallen for him, but because he was always hanging around Shizuku and Kaori, very few had ever worked up the courage to confess. However, he still received at least two confessions a month from girls that didn’t go to Hajime’s school. A real Casanova through and through.

The last guy, who’d lazily added on his own comments to Kouki’s line, was Ryuutarou Sakagami, Kouki’s best friend. Ryuutarou had short, trimmed hair and a gaze that seemed at once both cheerful and stern. He stood 190 centimeters tall, and had a massive, bear-like frame. As his build suggested, he was a musclehead who didn’t have much delicacy.

Because of his love for hard work and hot-blooded actions, he disliked Hajime, who spent all his time in school sleeping. Ryuutarou gave Hajime no more than a single glance before huffing disdainfully and ignoring him.

“Good morning Yaegashi-san, Amanogawa-kun, and Sakagami-kun. Heh, well, you know what they say, you reap what you sow. It’s my own fault for staying up all the time.” Hajime smiled wryly as he greeted Shizuku and the others. The two guys glared daggers at him, their eyes all but screaming *“What gives you the right to talk to Yaegashi-san so casually like that, huh!?”* at him. Shizuku was nearly as popular as Kaori after all.

“If you realize it’s a problem, shouldn’t you try and fix it? I don’t think it’s fair to Kaori to keep letting her spoil you. She doesn’t have time to always be looking after you either.” Kouki warned Hajime sternly.

Kouki also clearly thought Hajime was a failure of a student who was simply squandering Kaori’s kindness. Hajime desperately wanted to shout out *She hasn’t been spoiling me! And in fact, I’d really rather she leave me alone!*, but he

knew if he did his classmates would “escort” him somewhere quiet after school. Kouki was the kind of person who always thought he was right too, so Hajime simply shut his mouth and didn’t utter a single response.

Besides, there was really nothing to “fix.” Hajime had already decided to make his hobbies the centerpiece of his life. His father was a game designer and his mother a girls’ manga author, so he’d worked part-time at both their workplaces to gain experience in the field.

With his experience and interests, most employers were interested in him as he required no extra training, and his plans for the future were all perfectly laid out. Hajime firmly believed he was taking his life seriously already, which was why he saw no need to change his habits regardless of what anyone said to him. And if Kaori hadn’t started poking her nose into his affairs, he would have been able to quietly graduate school without attracting any attention to himself.

“Yeah, I guess. Ahaha...” Which was why Hajime simply tried to laugh off Kouki’s words. But, of course, the school’s goddess had to go and unintentionally drop another bomb.

“What are you talking about, Kouki-kun? I’m talking to Nagumo-kun because I want to.” The whole classroom broke out in an uproar at those words.

If looks could kill, Hajime would have died a hundred times over from the withering glares he received from the male students. They ground their teeth as they glowered at him, while Hiyama’s crew took it a step further and began discussing what place would be best to drag Hajime during lunch break.

“Huh...? Ah, I see. You really are far too kind, Kaori.”

It seemed Kouki interpreted that as Kaori being nice so as to not hurt Hajime’s feelings. Though he was perfect in many respects, or perhaps exactly because of that fact, he had one rather glaring flaw. Namely that he was a little too convinced of his own righteousness. Deciding that correcting him would be too much of a pain, Hajime instead chose to escape from reality by staring out the window instead.

“I’m sorry about that. They don’t mean any harm by it...” Shizuku quietly apologized to Hajime, as she was the only one present that was astute enough to grasp everyone’s feelings. Hajime simply shrugged his shoulders and smiled wryly

in response.

Meanwhile, the bell signaling the start of classes finally rang, and the teacher walked into the classroom. The teacher began the morning announcements, seemingly too used to the turbulent atmosphere in the classroom to care. Then, as always, Hajime drifted off to dreamland as class began.

Kaori smiled as she saw Hajime slumber. Shizuku stared at him, amazed, and mused that Hajime was quite the celebrity in a certain sense. The guys all scoffed at him while the rest of the girls stared, gazes full of scorn.

After a while, the classroom began to grow noisy again. As a habitual classroom napper, Hajime's body had naturally attuned itself to know when to wake up. Which was why his hazy consciousness was able to discern from the surrounding noise that it was lunchtime.

Hajime rummaged through his bag and brought out his lunch, a simple meal that could be finished in ten seconds, but still fully sated him. It seemed that most of the lunch buying group had already left for the cafeteria, as there were some people missing from the classroom.

A majority of people in Hajime's class usually brought their own lunch, though, which was why around two thirds of the class still remained. Additionally, it seemed that some of the students had questions for the fourth period social studies teacher, Aiko Hatayama, and were milling about the teacher's podium.

*Sluuurp! Gulp!* Having finished recharging his energy in just ten seconds, Hajime laid back down on his desk, planning to get some more shut-eye. However, the school goddess, perhaps more of a devil in Hajime's case, smiled happily as she scooted her seat closer to his, preventing him from returning to his slumber.

Hajime groaned inwardly. Monday must've made him take leave of his wits. Normally he would've quickly eat his lunch and bolted out of the classroom to find a secluded place for his afternoon nap, but two straight days of all-nighters had apparently taken their toll on him.

"That's rare, Nagumo-kun. You're still in the classroom. Did you not bring a lunch? If you'd like, you can have some of mine." As the frigid atmosphere descended upon the classroom once more Hajime screamed internally.

*I'm tired a yer shit,* his exasperated mind screamed out in some strange dialect. Hajime attempted to resist the inevitable as that thought crossed his mind.

"Ah, thanks for the invitation, Shirasaki-san. But I've already finished eating my lunch, so why not eat with Amanogawa-kun instead?" He showed Kaori the remnants of his packaged lunch as he said that. The rest of his classmates would probably have hated him for refusing too, but at least it was better than spending his lunch break walking over a bed of nails.

However, such a feeble resistance meant next to nothing in the face of the great goddess, so she continued relentlessly.

"Huh!? That's all you had for lunch? That won't do at all, you need to eat a proper meal! Here, I'll give you some of mine!"

*Please, please, just give me a break! Why can't you realize already!? Read the mood for once!* With each passing moment, Hajime could feel the pressure mounting, and his saviors finally appeared as cold sweat started running down his back. Kouki and Ryuutarou.

"Kaori, let's all eat lunch together. It seems that Nagumo needs some more sleep. And I won't allow anyone to eat Kaori's delicious handmade lunch while half-asleep!" Kouki flashed Kaori a dazzling smile as he said that pretentious line, but Kaori simply looked puzzled. Kaori was a bit slow, or rather just airheaded, so Kouki's handsome guy appeal was lost on her.

"Huh? Why do I need your permission to share my lunch, Kouki-kun?" Shizuku let out an involuntary snicker as she heard Kaori ask that question in such an earnest manner.

Kouki began laughing awkwardly and tried to change the subject, but the important point was that the four most famous people in school were sitting together with Hajime and the rest of the class was not at all happy about it. Hajime sighed deeply and continued grumbling to himself.

*I wish these guys would all just get summoned to another world or something. I mean, just look at them, they're the perfect party of four. They even feel like the kind of group that'd get sent to another world. Can't some god or princess or priestess or something just summon them away from here?* Trying to escape

from reality, Hajime sent his thoughts out to whatever other worlds were out there. He stood up and was about to give his usual evasive answer, when suddenly he froze.

There was a glowing silver circle engraved with various geometric patterns glowing in front of Hajime, at Kouki's feet.

The rest of the students all saw the strange circle as well. Everyone was frozen

in place, staring at the weird glowing pattern that, for lack of a better word, looked just like a magic circle.

The magic circle began to glow brighter and brighter, until its light enveloped the entire classroom. The circle itself began expanding as well, and when it finally grew big enough to cover Hajime's feet, everyone finally became unfrozen and started screaming. Aiko-sensei, who had remained in the classroom, yelled "Everyone! Get out of the classroom!" at the same time the magic circle flared up in a brilliant explosion of light.

After a few seconds, or maybe a few minutes, the light finally began to fade, and color returned to the classroom. However, the room was now deserted. Some chairs were knocked over, half-eaten lunchboxes were sitting on desks, and chopsticks and plastic bottles were scattered across the room. The classroom had everything still left in it except the people.

The mass high school disappearance incident caused quite a stir in the world, but that story was better saved for another time.

# Chapter I: Summoned to Another World with a Commonplace Class

Hajime, who'd covered his eyes with both hands and kept them tightly shut, slowly realized that the people around him were muttering something and he timidly opened his eyes. He was struck dumb at the sight of his surroundings.

The first thing his eyes registered was a massive mural. The mural, which stretched ten meters long, depicted a faintly smiling figure, whose gender seemed indeterminable, wreathed in a halo, their blond hair flowing freely behind them. Behind them in the background were plains, lakes, and mountains. The figure had both arms spread wide as if trying to grab hold of all of it. It was a truly beautiful, awe-inspiring work of art. But for some reason, Hajime felt chills run down his spine as he gazed upon it, and he quickly averted his eyes.

As he examined the rest of his surroundings, he quickly realized that he was in a vast chamber. The entire room was constructed of a gleaming white stone that seemed smooth to the touch. Marble, possibly. Massive pillars with sculptures carved into them rose up to the towering domed ceiling. The room resembled some sort of grand cathedral.

Hajime and the others were standing atop a type of plinth located in the deepest recesses of the room. They were raised above their immediate surroundings. Hajime's classmates were all looking around dumbfounded, just like him. It looks like whatever happened had affected the entire class.

Hajime turned around, looking to see what lay behind him. As he'd expected, Kaori was slumped on the ground. She didn't seem to have any injuries, so Hajime breathed a sigh of relief.

After confirming her safety, Hajime returned his gaze to the crowd of people surrounding him, who he assumed would be the ones to provide an explanation for their current situation.

Indeed, Hajime and his classmates were not the only occupants of the room. Around thirty or so people were standing before the plinth Hajime and the

others were on. It looked as if they were all praying, their hands crossed about their chests.

They were all clad in white robes decorated with gold embroidery. At their sides were something resembling a bishop's stave. The tips of their staves opened up into a fan shape, and instead of rings, several flat discs hung from the ends.

Eventually, one of the priests stepped forward. He was an old man in his seventies, dressed even more lavishly than his peers, with a richly decorated monk's cap that stood about thirty centimeters tall. Old was perhaps not the best word to describe him. If not for his deeply wrinkled face and aged eyes, one might think him a man in his early fifties.

His staff jingled as he walked, clear soothing notes reverberating throughout the halls all the while. Finally, he opened his mouth and said,

"Welcome to Tortus brave hero, and his companions. It is our pleasure to welcome you here. I am the pope of the Holy Church, Ishtar Langbard. It is an honor to make your acquaintances." The old man, who called himself Ishtar, broke out into a good-natured smile. He then led the still confused group of students into another room that was furnished with numerous chairs and long tables, saying it would be easier to speak calmly there.

The new room he'd guided the students to was just as lavishly built as the first. The exemplary craftsmanship of the furniture and the tapestries hanging on the walls was evident even to the students' untrained eyes. The layout of the room implied that it was some manner of banquet hall. Aiko Hatayama and Kouki's group of four all claimed seats at the head of their respective tables, and their followers all arranged themselves around them. Hajime ended up at the very end of his table.

The reason no one had made a fuss so far was because everyone was still too busy processing what had just happened. Besides, Ishtar had just said he would explain what had happened and Kouki, with his max-level charisma, had managed to calm everyone down. Aiko-sensei had tears in her eyes as she watched a student do what should have been the teacher's job.

The moment everyone had finished seating themselves, a number of carts

entered the room, pushed along by a retinue of maids. Actual maids, to boot! Not those sham maids found in a certain electronic sanctuary, nor those old, plump maids that could still be found in various European countries. They were bona-fide maids, the kind every man dreamed of meeting!

Even in such an incomprehensible situation, their insatiable curiosity and libido drove most of the boys to gaze longingly at the beautiful maids. When the girls saw how they melted over the maids, they glared at the boys in a manner cold enough to freeze hell itself.

Hajime was also just about ready to ogle the maid who'd started serving him a drink, but he felt a glacial stare piercing his back and decided to keep his gaze fixed straight ahead. After a moment, he risked a glance back in the direction he'd felt the stare from, only to see Kaori beaming happily at him. He decided to pretend he'd never felt anything odd.

Ishtar finally began talking once everyone had been served their refreshments.

"Now then, I am certain you all must be feeling very confused about the situation you've found yourselves in. I shall explain everything, starting from the beginning. All I ask is that you hear me out until the end." Ishtar's explanation was so generic and unreasonable that it seemed as if it'd come out of a fantasy book template.

In short, this was what he said— First, that this world was called Tortus. Within Tortus lived three different races, humans, demons, and demi-humans. Humans resided in the northern half of the continent, demons on the southern half, and demi-humans far to the east within a massive forest.

Humans and demons had a strained relationship, having been at war for hundreds of years. Though demons lacked the sheer numbers humans possessed, their individual strength far surpassed that of most humans, balancing out the difference nicely. Both sides were currently locked in a stalemate, and a major battle hadn't broken out in decades. However, there had been disturbing movements among the demons as of late. Namely the fact that they had managed to tame monsters.

Monsters were supposedly wild animals that had undergone a magical metamorphosis after having mana poured into them. Though it seemed that

humans had yet to fully understand the biology of monsters, so they weren't quite sure. They were apparently very powerful and even capable of using magic, which made them an extremely dangerous threat.

Up until that point, very few people had been able to tame such ferocious beasts. And even those who could were unable to handle more than one or two at a time. However, the situation had changed. Which meant that the only advantage the humans had over the demons, numbers, had been eliminated. As such, humans faced an unprecedented crisis that threatened the existence of their very race.

"The one who summoned you all here was the blessed lord, Ehit. He is the guardian deity of us humans, and the one true god of the Holy Church. The supreme ruler who created the world itself. I suspect Lord Ehit grew aware of our plight. He realized that humanity was doomed to annihilation, so he summoned you here in order to prevent such a disaster. You heroes are humans from a world greater than ours, and therefore carry within you strength that surpasses the humans of this world,"

Ishtar paused for a moment before continuing hesitantly, "Or at least, that is what was shown to me in a divine revelation."

"Regardless, I implore you all to do as Lord Ehit has willed you. Please, defeat the demons and save the human race from destruction." He seemed almost in a trance as he said that. Had to have been remembering the time he received that divine revelation.

According to Ishtar, over 90% of humans revered the creator god Ehit, and those who received his divine visions were without exception given high-ranking positions in the Holy Church. As Hajime was mulling over how twisted a world must be for people to happily believe in "the will of god" without question, and how dangerous such a belief was, someone stood up and began hotly protesting Ishtar's words. That someone was the teacher Aiko.

"You can't possibly be serious! You're telling these children to go fight in a war!? That's absolutely unacceptable! As a teacher, I cannot allow it! Send us back right this instant! These kids all have families back home who must be worried sick! You can't just kidnap them like this!"

Each of her words dripped with rather evident anger. Aiko, the almost twenty-five social studies teacher, was very popular with the kids. She stood only 140 centimeters tall, with a baby face and her hair kept in a neat bob cut. Her childlike appearance, and her tendency to run around doing everything she could for the sake of her students, though most of her efforts were for naught, had endeared her to many. The gap between how hard she tried and how helpful she actually ended up being had made most of the students see her as a kid that needed to be protected more than an adult to be respected.

Many of them had taken to calling her by the nickname Ai-chan, though she always grew angry when they did. Since she was aiming to be a respected teacher, she disliked being called by familiar nicknames.

This time too, she flared up at Ishtar to protest the unreasonable forced summoning in order to look like a proper teacher. Unfortunately, the students regarded her the same as always, thinking something to the effect of “Look, Ai-chan’s at it again. Always trying so hard,” as she tore into Ishtar. However, Ishtar’s next words froze everyone’s blood cold.

“I understand your feelings, however... I am unable to return you to your world at present.”

Silence filled the room. The oppressive atmosphere was felt by everyone present. They all stared at Ishtar blankly, unable to properly process what he had just said.

“W-What do you mean... you’re unable!? If you called us here, you should be able to send us back, shouldn’t you!?” Aiko-sensei screamed loudly.

“As I stated earlier, it is Lord Ehit who summoned you here. The only reason we were in that room at all was to greet you heroes, and to offer up our prayers to Lord Ehit. We humans do not possess the power to interfere with other worlds, so whether or not you can return also depends on His will.”

“N-No way...”

Aiko slumped back into her chair, all the strength drained out of her. The other students all started yelling as the truth of Ishtar’s words sank in.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me? What do you mean we can’t go back!?”

“You can’t do this! Please, just send us back somehow!”

“A war!? You can’t be serious! Take us the fuck back right now!”

“This can’t be happening, this can’t be happening, this can’t be happening...”

The entire class fell into a panic. Hajime was shaken by this development as well, but because he was an otaku, he had at least seen countless books and games that had the same premise. Which was why he was able to determine that it was not the worst possible scenario, and that was the reason he was at least somewhat calmer than the other students. For reference, the worst case scenario he was imagining was the one in which they all got summoned as slaves.

Ishtar said nothing and silently watched on as all of the students panicked. Though Ishtar was silent, Hajime thought he could see contempt hidden within the depths of the old man’s eyes. Hajime presumed he was thinking “These people were chosen by god, why are they not rejoicing?” or something along those lines.

Kouki stood up amidst the hysterical group of students and slammed his fist down onto the table with a bang. That managed to get the attention of most of the kids. Once he had confirmed that everyone’s eyes were on him, Kouki began speaking.

“Everyone, there’s no point in complaining to Ishtar. There’s nothing he can do about it now. And... And I, at least, have decided to stand and fight. These people are about to be annihilated. Knowing that, how can I possibly leave them to such a tragic fate? And besides, if we’ve been summoned here to save humanity, it’s possible we’ll be allowed to go back once we’ve saved them... Well, Ishtar-san? Do you think that’s possible?”

“It is as you say. Lord Ehit is not so unkind that he would ignore a request from his chosen heroes.”

“And we’ve all gained some amazing powers, right? Ever since I arrived here, it’s felt like I’ve somehow grown way stronger.”

“Yes, that is correct. It would be safe to assume that each of you have the equivalent strength of anywhere from a few to few dozen regular men.”

“Alright, then we should be fine. I’m going to fight. If we save everyone, then

we can go home. So just you watch! I'm going to save everyone, including us!" Kouki clenches his fists tightly as he proclaimed his noble intentions, flashing an almost sickeningly dazzling smile at the end.

At the same time, his overwhelming charisma started taking effect. Students who were despairing mere moments ago began to regain their sense of composure. They all looked at Kouki with wonder, as if they were staring at hope itself. Most of the female students had adoration mixed into their gaze as well.

"Heh, knew you'd say that. Still, I'd be worried letting you go off on your own... Which is why I'm coming with you."

"Ryuutarou..."

"Looks like that's the only choice we have right now. It pisses me off that we don't get any real say in the matter, but... I'll help too."

"Shizuku..."

"I-If Shizuku-chan's going to fight, then I will too!"

"Kaori..."

The usual group of friends all chimed in their support for Kouki. Swept along by the flow, the rest of the students naturally all agreed to fight as well. Aiko-sensei was in tears as she ran between her students, imploring them to stop. However, she was ultimately powerless, completely unable to keep Kouki's charisma from infecting the rest of the class.

In the end, everyone agreed to help fight in the world's war. However, most students probably had no idea what war was really like, nor did they even want to fathom it. In a sense, they might have just been trying to escape from reality to preserve their own sanity.

Hajime was considering all of those factors as he observed Ishtar out of the corner of his eye. Ishtar had a rather satisfied smile on his face, something which Hajime took note of.

Ishtar had been discreetly monitoring Kouki as he had given his speech, mentally jotting down how he reacted to which words. Kouki, who had always had a strong sense of justice, had reacted quickly when Ishtar spoke of the

tragedy that had befallen the human race. And Ishtar had made sure to emphasize the cruelty and brutality of the demons when he saw Kouki's reaction to his words.

After all, it was obvious that Ishtar had seen right through Kouki's personality. He had realized who among their group held the most influence.

Hajime supposed that as the top leader of a global religious institution, it stood to reason that Ishtar would be so discerning, but he still mentally filed him away as someone to watch out for.

Regardless, since they had chosen to assist the humans in their war, they now needed to learn how to fight. No matter how amazing their newfound powers were, they were still high school students that had been living in the peaceful country of Japan. It would've been impossible for them to just start fighting against demons and monsters without any training.

However, it seemed Ishtar had prepared for that eventuality as well, since he explained to the students that there were people ready to receive them in the Heiligh Kingdom. Said kingdom was apparently at the foot of the divine mountain, and the temple they were currently in was the head temple of the Holy Church that stood at its summit.

The kingdom had very close ties with the Holy Church—according to legend, one of Ehit's progeny, Sharam Vaan, had founded the kingdom. Of all the human kingdoms, it was apparently the one with the richest history. The fact that the Church's most sacred temple was in the kingdom's backyard spoke volumes about how deep their connection ran.

Hajime and the others headed for the temple's front gate. They were about to embark on their journey to the kingdom below. As they walked through the grand triumphal arcs that comprised the main gate of the temple, they were greeted by an endless sea of clouds. Because no one had suffered from altitude sickness, they hadn't realized they'd been up so high up. Hajime assumed that magic had something to do with making the environment around the temple habitable. They all stood in wonder as they stared at the clear blue sky and the waves of clouds sparkling in the sunlight.

Ishtar looked on proudly as everyone gawked, before urging them onward. As

they made their way forward, they came upon a massive white circular pedestal that was surrounded by a fence. They walked through a lavish hallway made of the same white stone as the cathedral and stepped up onto the pedestal.

Engraved within the stone of the pedestal was a large magic circle. On the other side of the fence lay a steep drop to the clouds below, so most students huddled as close to the center of the pedestal as they could. But they were unable to restrain their curiosity, and timidly glanced around their surroundings despite their fear. As they were looking around, Ishtar began to chant,

“Faith is the key that opens the road to heaven—Celestial Path.”

The magic circle began emitting a blinding light as he finished chanting. The entire pedestal began gliding down toward the ground, as if attached to some invisible cable. It appeared that Ishtar’s chant had been an activation signal of sorts. It functioned exactly like a fantasy cable car. The students all started clamoring excitedly as they saw their first display of magic. There was quite the ruckus when they passed through the sea of clouds too.

Once on the other side, the students could finally make out the ground below. Directly below them was a huge city, or rather a small kingdom. A huge castle that looked as if it were jutting out of the mountainside lay at its center, with the rest of the city spreading outward in a circle. The capital city of Heiligh. The magical cable car seemingly ran from the Holy Church down to the roof of one of the castle’s towers via some aerial pathway.

Hajime smiled sardonically at the extravagant theatrics. The entire journey had clearly been crafted to resemble “God’s disciples descending down from heaven,” or some such feat. It was quite likely that with a display so ostentatious, some of the more ardent believers would come to worship not just Hajime and his companions, but the priests of the order who had escorted them down as well.

Hajime recalled what he had read in history books about pre-war japan. A time when religion and politics were very closely tied to each other. And it was those very ties that had brought about a great tragedy. In the end, it was quite possible that this world was even more twisted than ancient japan was. After all, this was a world in which a supernatural being powerful enough to interfere with

other worlds existed. It wouldn't have been surprising at all if the whole world literally revolved around God's will.

This entire world, including everyone's chances of returning home, all rested in the palm of God's hand. As the outline of the capital grew more detailed, Hajime felt an inexplicable sense of unease well up inside him. He shook away the oppressive thoughts and reminded himself that he had to focus on doing what he could for the time being.

The moment they landed atop the royal palace, Hajime and the others were escorted to the throne room. The hallways they passed on their way were every bit as ostentatious as the temple had been. Along the way they passed by knights, servants, maids, and government officials. Everyone who passed gazed at the students with a mixture of awe and wonder. It seemed that most people were aware of who the students were.

Hajime's sense of unease continued to increase, and he furtively followed behind everyone at the end of the procession.

Ishtar and the party of heroes finally found themselves standing before a pair of massive double doors, into which numerous beautiful designs had been engraved. Two guards were standing at attention on either side of the door, and they loudly announced the group's arrival to whomever was waiting within. Then, without waiting for a reply, they swung the doors open.

Ishtar leisurely passed through the entrance, clearly at ease. All of the students timidly followed behind him, with the exception of Kouki and his friends, who were seemingly unaffected by the splendor surrounding them.

Within the room stretched a long red carpet that ended at the far wall. At its end lay a magnificent chair—or rather throne. Standing in front of the throne was a middle-aged man who radiated an aura of solemn dignity.

Next to him was presumably the queen, and next to her were a boy and a girl, both with blond hair and striking blue eyes. The boy, who was the younger of the two, seemed no more than ten years old, while the girl must have been around fourteen or fifteen. On the left side of the carpet was a line of soldiers, all clad in armor and uniform. On the right, a line of civil officers. Altogether, there were probably around thirty people waiting in the room.

Once they were directly before the throne, Ishtar left the students and went to stand beside the king. He then proffered his hand to the king, who took it reverently and kissed it with the slightest brush of his lips. It looked like the pope was even more important than the king. Hajime sighed inwardly, as he was now certain that “God” ran the kingdom.

A flurry of self-introductions followed after that. The king’s name was Eliheid S. B. Heiligh, and his wife the queen was called Luluaria. The blond boy was the prince Lundel, and the girl the princess Liliana.

Then came introductions for the knight captain, the prime minister, and other important dignitaries. As an aside, the fact that the young prince’s eyes were glued onto Kaori the whole time made it clear that her charm worked on the men of this world as well.

Once the introductions had finished, a huge feast was laid out and the students were able to enjoy the dishes of a parallel world. Though, for the most part, it wasn’t very different from western food back on earth. The pink sauce and rainbow-colored drink that they sometimes brought out was especially delicious.

Prince Lundel spent most of the meal talking with Kaori, and all the other boys stared on at them worriedly. Hajime secretly hoped the brunt of their jealousy would move away from him and onto the prince instead. Though he didn’t really expect a ten year old boy to have much of a chance with Kaori.

After they finished their meal, Hajime and the others were introduced to the instructors they would be training with in return for being clothed and fed by the palace. Their instructors had been chosen from the ranks of active duty knights and court magicians. The king probably wanted to strengthen the relationship between the students and his kingdom for the inevitable war to come.

Once dinner and introductions were finished, everyone was led to their own individual rooms. Hajime was certain he wasn’t the only one who was dumbstruck by the huge canopy bed he found in his room. The room was so luxurious that he couldn’t fully relax, but he’d already experienced quite the hectic day, so he was tired. He flopped down on his bed and fell asleep almost instantly as the tension drained out of him.

Training began bright and early the next morning. Everyone was handed a twelve centimeter by seven centimeter silver plate. As the students stared at those strange plates, the knight captain, Meld Loggins, began explaining their function.

Hajime wondered if it was really alright to have the knight captain be the one to watch over their training, but he supposed that it would be bad for both their image and lives if the kingdom left the party of heroes' training in the hands of some amateur.

Captain Meld himself seemed to be quite happy to oversee their training, as he said "Besides, this gives me a reason to push all the boring paperwork onto my vice-captain!" with a hearty laugh. It seemed the captain was perfectly content with his role, though the poor vice-captain probably was not.

"Alright, you kids all got your plates? We call them status plates. As their name suggests, they take various parameters and quantify them for you. They also make for great identification cards. So long as you've got these, you'll be fine even if you get lost somewhere, so hang onto them tight, you hear?" The knight captain had a very informal way of speaking. When asked about it, he had simply said "We'll be comrades fighting together on the battlefield, so no point in being so stiff with each other!" and even urged them to speak casually with all the other knights.

Hajime and the others found his friendly attitude pleasant. They would have found it awkward to have people far older than them showing them respect anyways.

"You'll see that one side of the plate has a magic circle inscribed on it. Use the needles I passed out to prick your finger and drip some blood onto the circle. That will identify you as the owner of the plate. Then, if you say "Open Status," you'll see your current stats displayed on the plate. Oh, and don't bother asking me how it works. I've got no clue. These things are artifacts left over from ancient times."

"Artifacts?" Kouki asked, stumbling over the unfamiliar word.

"Artifacts refer to powerful magical items that we no longer have the technology to reproduce. They were supposedly all made during the age of the

gods when the creator's descendants still walked the earth. The status plates you all hold are all artifacts from that era as well, but they're the only artifacts that still see widespread use to this day. Most other artifacts are coveted national treasures, but there are enough of these plates that even average citizens own one. It's helpful since they make for very reliable identification."

It seemed that the artifact that produced these status plates still existed as well, and every year new plates were produced under the strict supervision and control of the Holy Church.

The students all nodded in affirmation as they listened to his explanation. Once it was finished, they all gingerly pricked their fingers and rubbed the blood that welled up onto the magic circle of their plates. The magic circles flared briefly as blood touched them. Hajime, too, rubbed some blood onto his plate.

His status plate flared up briefly as well, and like ink spreading through wool, his plate was slowly dyed a sky blue. Hajime was taken aback. The other students also looked on in surprise as their plates changed color.

Captain Meld continued his explanation of the plates after that. Apparently each person had their own distinct color of mana, and when their information was entered into their plates, the plates changed color to match it. The reason they were able to serve as such reliable identification cards was because their color and the color of their owner's mana were always the same.

*So wait, my mana's light blue? Or I guess closer to sky blue? It's real pretty.*

Glad that his mana wasn't pitch black or anything along those lines, Hajime looked around and saw that everyone else was also busy staring at their own colors. Kouki's was predictably pure white. Ryuutarou's was dark green, Kaori's a very light purple, and Shizuku's the deep blue of lapis lazuli.

"I realize you're all impressed, but don't forget to check your stats, okay?" Captain Meld smiled wryly as he reminded the students to confirm their stats. His voice brought them all back to their sense and they gave Meld a brief look before hurriedly checking their stats.

Hajime returned his own gaze back down to his status plate. On it, he found written—

Hajime Nagumo Age: 17 Male Level: 1

Job: Synergist

Strength: 10

Vitality: 10

Defense: 10

Agility: 10

Magic: 10

Magic Defense: 10

Skills: Transmute — Language Comprehension

—the above information. Hajime felt that he'd almost turned into some kind of video game character as he looked at his stats. Everyone else was also absorbed in reading their plates. Seeing that, Captain Meld began explaining the different stats.

"Everyone got a good look their stats? Alright, let me explain them from the top. First, we have your level. See it? That number grows as your other stats grow. The highest level is 100, and when you've reached that you're at your limits as a human being. In other words, one's current level shows how much of their full potential they've realized. Reaching 100 means unlocking all of your latent potential, and is a cap beyond which you cannot grow. Very few people manage to make it to level 100, though."

So it wasn't exactly like a game, since raising your stats increased your level and not the other way around.

"Your stats will naturally increase as you train, and you can also use magic or magic-imbued items to raise your stats. Also, those with a high magic stat will naturally grow faster than others. No one knows exactly why, but we assume it's because a person's mana assists in the growth of other stats. Later on you'll all get to choose equipment that corresponds to your individual stats. The items in our treasury will be yours for the taking! You're the heroes who are going to save our kingdom after all!" Judging by Captain Meld's explanation, defeating a monster wouldn't magically increase one's stats. Everyone just had to train the

old fashioned way.

“Next up, do you all see that little box that says job in it? Put simply, that refers to your natural aptitude. It’s directly linked to the skills box in the bottom, and your job determines the kind of skills you can learn. Few people possess a job. Jobs are split into combat-based and non-combat-based disciplines. Combat jobs are exceedingly rare. Only one in every thousand, or ten thousand depending on the job, people have a combat-based job. Non-combat jobs are technically rare too, but... well, one in every hundred people has one. Some of them are even common enough that one in every ten people has one, actually. There’s a lot of people who have non-combat production related jobs.”

Hajime looked back down at his status plate. His job was “Synergist.” Which meant his talents had to do with synergizing, whatever that was supposed to be.

Ishtar had said that Hajime and the others came from a world superior to their own, and that they possessed better abilities than the humans of Tortus due to that fact. *Then it’s only natural that I have a job,* thought Hajime as his lips curled up into a smile. There was no person who wouldn’t be happy to be told they were gifted with a special talent.

However, at captain Meld’s next words, Hajime’s smile vanished and was replaced by a cold sweat.

“Next... well, your stats are simply what they say they are. The average for most stats at level 1 is around 10. But you’re all heroes, so you surely have far higher stats than that! Man I’m so jealous of you guys! Oh yes, don’t forget to report your stats to me. I’ll need to know them to decide how to best train you guys.” The average stats for someone at level 1 were around 10. And each and every one of Hajime’s stats were a perfect 10. His mind raced furiously as cold sweat poured down his back.

*Huh? Doesn’t that mean that my stats are totally average... like completely and utterly mediocre? I don’t have any godlike cheat powers? My power level isn’t over 9000? Wh-What about everyone else? Maybe everyone’s just like this at the start...* Hajime clung onto this last sliver of hope as he furtively glanced around at the other students. Everyone’s eyes were sparkling as they looked at their stats. Not a single one of them was breaking out in a cold sweat like Hajime.

Kouki was the first to step up and show his stats to Captain Meld. His stats were as follows—

Kouki Amanogawa Age: 17 Male Level: 1

Job: Hero

Strength: 100

Vitality: 100

Defense: 100

Agility: 100

Magic: 100

Magic Defense: 100

Skills: Elemental affinity — Elemental Resistance — Physical Resistance — Advanced Sorcery — Swordsmanship — Superhuman Strength — Armor Proficiency — Foresight — Increased Mana Recovery — Detect Presence — Detect Magic — Limit Break — Language Comprehension

The guy was a living personification of cheat skills.

“Whoa, you really are a hero. You already have stats in the three digits at level 1! And most people normally only get two or three skills! You’re way beyond normal. What a reliable hero!”

“Well, you know how it is... Ahaha...” Kouki blushed and scratched his head as Captain Meld praised him.

As an aside, captain Meld was level 62 His stats were all within the 300 range, and he was one of the strongest humans alive. But at just level 1, Kouki was already a third of the way to his strength. If his growth rates were just as high, he’d overtake the captain in no time.

In addition, it seemed as if your skills were basically the innate talents you were born with, so there was no way to increase them. The exception being derivative skills. Those were skills that were acquired by spending a lifetime polishing one’s talents, something one acquired by surpassing their limits in a certain field. Put simply, it was when someone suddenly discovered the trick to doing something

they'd always struggled to before, and rapidly increased their proficiency with it.

Hajime had hoped Kouki was just somehow special, but everyone else also had overpowered abilities, though none quite matched up to Kouki's. And it looked like everyone else had a combat-based job without exception.

Hajime stared at the word Synergist that filled his job box. From the name alone, he found it hard to imagine it was a combat-based job. He only had two skills too. To make matters worse, one of them was Language Comprehension, which every summoned being had. In other words, he effectively only had one skill. Even Hajime's stiff smile began vanishing from his face. Finally, it was his turn to show his stats, so he presented his plate to Captain Meld.

Captain Meld was ecstatic after having seen how ridiculous everyone's stats had been. He was probably elated to have so many overpowered allies. But his smile froze in place when he saw Hajime's plate. He muttered "Did I just misread it?" and began rapping the plate with his knuckles, then shone some light on it. After staring at it for a long time, he finally returned the plate to Hajime with a complicated expression.

"Umm, well, you see... A Synergist is basically a blacksmith of sorts. It might come in handy if you plan on opening a smithy, but otherwise..." Captain Meld muttered out a poor explanation of Hajime's class.

Hajime was certain the boys in his class who all hated him would jump at this new chance to belittle him. A blacksmithing class was clearly not a combat-based job. The rest of his classmates all had combat-based jobs, and he highly doubted his particular job would be of much use in battle.

Daisuke Hiyama grinned wickedly as he hollered out to Hajime,

"Hey Nagumo. Don't tell me you seriously got a non-combat job? How's a blacksmith gonna fight monsters? Hey Meld, is this Synergist or whatever a rare job?"

"No, not particularly. One in every ten people has the class. In fact, all of the craftsmen the kingdom employs have the job."

"Gimme a break, Nagumo. You're gonna fight with something like that?" Hiyama folded his arms provocatively as he said those words. As Hajime looked

around, he could see that most of his classmates, the boys especially, were all laughing at him.

“Who knows. You never know until you try.”

“Show us your stats then, if you’re so confident. They better be way high to make up for your shitty job.“

Hiyama had most likely already guessed Hajime’s stats from Captain Meld’s expression, but he simply wanted an excuse to bully Hajime some more. He possessed quite a nasty personality. His three flunkies all jeered at Hajime as well. They were the kind of stereotypical thugs that bullied the weak and groveled before the mighty. Their actions were so clearly malicious that Kaori and Shizuku both glared at them, eyes full of disdain.

Despite how smitten they were with her, none of them seemed to realize she disliked such bullying. Hajime lazily handed his plate over to Hiyama.

When he saw the stats engraved on it, Hiyama burst out laughing. He passed the plate down to his other underlings and they all sneered or laughed at Hajime as well.

“Bwahahaha... What the hell, man! You’re like totally average! Actually, 10’s exactly average, so I bet there are even some babies out there stronger than you!”

“Hyahahaha, you’ve gotta be kidding me! This guy’s not even gonna last ten minutes! He’d die so fast that you couldn’t even use him as a meat shield!”

Unable to stand it any longer, Kaori opened her mouth to give them a piece of her mind. But before she could get out a single word, someone else began yelling at them. That someone was Aiko-sensei.

“Hey! Stop laughing at him! I won’t allow anyone to laugh at their classmates on my watch! As a teacher, I absolutely will not condone it! Now return Nagumo-kun’s plate this instant!”

The boys were all taken aback by how much anger was visible in Aiko-sensei’s small frame. They hurriedly returned Hajime’s plate in order to avoid her wrath. Aiko-sensei turned to Hajime and gave him an encouraging pat on the shoulder.

“Nagumo-kun, don’t worry about your job! Look, I got a non-combat job too! And aside from my job, most of my stats are pretty average too! You’re not alone!”

Aiko-sensei then showed her pink colored plate to Hajime with a “Here, look!”

Hatayama Aiko Age: 25 Female Level: 1

Job: Farmer

Strength: 5

Vitality: 10

Defense: 10

Agility: 5

Magic: 100

Magic Defense: 10

Skills: Soil Management — Soil Restoration — Large-scale Cultivation — Enhanced Fertilization — Selective Breeding — Plant Appraisal — Fertilizer Production — Mixed Breeding — Auto Harvesting — Fermentation Proficiency — Wide-area Temperature Control — Farming Barrier — Fertile Rain — Language Comprehension.

Hajime’s eyes resembled a dead fish’s once he finished reading Aiko’s plate.

“Huh? What’s wrong, Nagumo-kun!?” Aiko asked as she shook Hajime back and forth.

It was true that her overall stats were low, and that she did not possess a combat class, but her exceptional magic stat and large number of skills meant that she would reach the level of other heroes with just a little training. And lest everyone forget, an army marches on its stomach. Aiko-sensei’s job was nothing like Hajime’s. His was so commonplace that there were myriad others who were more proficient in it. In other words, even Aiko-sensei was plenty overpowered

Hajime felt doubly betrayed for getting his hopes up even a little.

“Oh my, Ai-chan, that was the final nail in the coffin...”

“N-Nagumo-kun! Are you alright!?”

Shizuku smiled sadly as she watched Hajime shut down, while Kaori worriedly ran over to him. Aiko-sensei tilted her head in confusion. As always, she tried her best, but ended up being completely unhelpful. The students smiled at her unchanging ditziness. Aiko-sensei had managed to achieve her initial goal of preventing Hajime's bullying, but he still smiled emptily as he thought of the difficulties that lay ahead, and the treatment he would definitely receive.

Two weeks had passed since Hajime was labeled the weakest and most useless member of the class. He was currently in the library using the break time he had between training sessions to investigate something. In his hands was a book labeled "Monsters of the Northern Continent, a Picture Book." As its name suggested, it was a picture book about monsters.

As for why he was reading such a book, that was because he had not grown at all after two weeks of training. In fact, the past two weeks had only served to highlight how pathetically weak he was. Hoping to cover his physical deficiencies with knowledge, Hajime spent most of his free time in the library.

He perused the picture book for a while before suddenly breathing out a sigh and throwing it down on the desk. The librarian happened to be passing by right as he did that, so Hajime was met with a glowering stare.

Hajime jumped, as he was clearly startled, and hurriedly apologized. The librarian's angry glare implied that he wouldn't tolerate it happening a second time. *What on earth am I doing?* Hajime thought with a sigh.

Hajime suddenly took out his status plate and stared at it, his hands resting on his chin.

Hajime Nagumo Age: 17 Male Level: 2

Job: Synergist

Strength: 12

Vitality: 12

Defense: 12

Agility: 12

Magic: 12

Magic Defense: 12

Skills: Transmute — Language Comprehension

That was all the growth he had to show after two weeks of harsh training. *I can't even say I've gotten much stronger!* Hajime screamed internally. For comparison, Kouki's stats had grown at an astronomical rate.

Kouki Amanogawa Age: 17 Male Level: 10

Job: Hero

Strength: 200

Vitality: 200

Defense: 200

Agility: 200

Magic: 200

Magic Defense: 200 Skills: Elemental Affinity — Elemental Resistance — Physical Resistance — Advanced Sorcery — Swordsmanship — Superhuman Strength — Armor Proficiency — Foresight — Increased Mana Recovery — Detect Presence — Detect Magic — Limit Break — Language Comprehension

His growth rate was roughly five times as fast as Hajime's. And to make matters worse, Hajime had discovered he had no real affinity for magic.

What exactly did having no magical affinity mean? Well, it had to do with how magic functioned in this world. In the world of Tortus, magic functioned in a very specific manner. By chanting an incantation, one could transfer their mana into a magic circle, and the spell inscribed within that circle would activate, thus casting magic. It was impossible for anyone to directly manipulate their mana, so each spell needed its own corresponding magic circle.

Additionally, the length of an incantation was directly proportional to how much mana one could pour into a magic circle, so the effectiveness of a spell was directly proportional to the amount of mana used to cast it. And the more complicated a spell was, or the larger an area of effect it had, the more inscriptions needed in the magic circle to complete the spell. Which naturally meant that the magic circle itself needed to be larger too.

For comparison, the standard fireball spell that appeared in most RPGs and the like normally required a magic circle about ten centimeters in diameter. Every spell needed the basic inscriptions for the element, strength, range, span, and magic absorption (the amount of mana someone needed to provide the magic circle in order to activate the spell). If one wanted to add additional parameters such as length the spell is maintained, then extra inscriptions were needed for that as well.

There was, however, an exception to this rule. And that exception was magical affinity.

Magical affinity was basically a measure of how well one's natural constitution allowed them to shorten inscriptions. For example, someone with an affinity for the fire element would no longer need to add the element portion of the inscription to their spell as long as it was a fire-based one. People with an aptitude for something were able to use a mental image to take the place of the inscription. They didn't need to carve the inscription anywhere into the magic circle. By simply imagining flames while chanting the spell, they are capable of adding the fire element to it.

Most people had some level of magical affinity, which meant that the above mentioned ten centimeter magic circle would generally be smaller. However, Hajime had absolutely no affinity for magic whatsoever, meaning that on top of inscriptions for the basic five properties, he had to include inscriptions for the trajectory, spread, and even conclusion for each of his spells. For him, the standard fireball spell required a magic circle two meters in diameter, making magic completely impractical in combat.

On a somewhat related topic, magic circles came in two different types. The more common of the two were magic circles drawn onto a special kind of disposable paper. The other type were magic circles carved into specific minerals. The former allowed for many different variations of spells, but they burned out after one use and their power was generally on the low side. On the other hand, the latter were bulky and limited in the spells they could cast, but they were reusable and far more powerful than their paper counterparts. The staves Ishtar and the other priests carried all had mineral-type magic circles engraved into them.

Because of his low stats, close combat was impossible, and because of his lack of magical affinity, he could not rely on magic either. The only skill his job had provided him, Transmute, simply allowed him to transform the shape of various ores, or forge them together into alloys. It was effectively useless. He was also told there were no useful artifacts for Synergists, and was simply given a pair of gloves with related magic circles inscribed into it.

After a lot of training, he was finally able to make pitfalls and protrusions in the ground, and the more he trained, the larger he was able to make their sizes, but... he had to be in direct contact with the target to activate them. Running up in front of an enemy and then squatting down to put his hands on the ground was no better than suicide, so even those skills were of no real help to him in combat.

Over the past two weeks, Hajime had come to be treated as a complete waste of space by his classmates. He had attempted to increase his knowledge as a last ditch attempt to somehow become useful, but even that prospect seemed to have dim hopes, so he sighed more and more frequently as time went on.

*If I'm going to be useless around here, I might as well just go out on a journey or something,* Hajime thought as he stared out the library window. He had reached the end of his rope. Hajime had spent the last two weeks devoting himself more than anyone else to the lectures they were being given about the world, spending all his time thinking of where to go.

*I'm thinking the land of demi-humans would probably be best... I can't really say I've been to another world if I haven't even seen a single pair of animal ears. But supposedly their territory is really deep within the sea of trees. And they're apparently discriminated against everywhere, so aside from a few slaves, you don't really see many of them outside their homeland.*

According to what Hajime had learned so far, the demi-humans were harshly discriminated against, so they lived deep within the Haltina Woods to avoid contact with other people. They were supposedly discriminated against because they didn't possess any mana.

Legend stated that starting with Ehit, each of the gods shaped the very foundations of the world with magic. The magic everyone used now was

supposedly a deteriorated version of the power the gods once held. For that reason, it was common belief that magic itself was a gift from the gods. Of course, said belief was strengthened by the fact that the Holy Church preached it as the truth. Because of that, demi-humans, who didn't possess mana and were unable to use magic, were seen as wicked creatures who'd been abandoned by the gods.

This had naturally led Hajime to question "But what about monsters?" However, it seemed that monsters were simply thought of as natural disasters, so no one considered them creatures who had received "God's blessing" or anything along those lines because they were seen as nothing more than wild beasts. *What a convenient interpretation,* Hajime thought, clearly disgusted.

Even worse, though the demons all worshipped a god different from the humans' "Lord Ehit," they too discriminated against the demi-humans.

Demons supposedly had a far higher magical affinity than humans, so they were able to cast spells with much shorter incantations and smaller magic circles than them. They resided in the center of the southern continent, in the demon kingdom of Garland. Though few in number, it seemed that even children in the kingdom were capable of wielding powerful offensive magic. So, in a way, every single citizen of the kingdom was a soldier.

The humans of this world saw the demons who worshiped a different god as their mortal foes (thanks to the teachings of the Holy Church) and despised the demi-humans as godless vermin. And apparently the demons were no better. Though he couldn't be sure, Hajime guessed the demi-humans just wanted to be left alone. It made sense considering how exclusive the other two groups seemed to be.

*Hmm, if navigating the huge sea of trees seems impossible, then maybe I should try for the western ocean instead? If I'm remembering right, there's a city called Erisen that sits by the sea. If I can't get my fill of animal ears, then I at least want to see some mermaids. Fantasy creatures like those are every man's dream. Plus, I want to see what the seafood's like in this world.*

The coastal city of Erisen was home to a group of demi-humans known as seamen, and rested on the shores of the western ocean. They were the only

group of demi-humans that the kingdom sheltered. The reason being that the city produced about 80% of the kingdom's seafood. Such a practical reason.

*What happened to them being a godless race?* Hajime had thought sarcastically when he had first heard about them.

But in order to get to the western sea from his location, one first had to cross the Gruen Desert. Two important locations that were used as waypoint markers for traders in the desert were the oasis Dukedom of Ankaji and the Grand Gruen Volcano. And the Grand Gruen Volcano was one of the seven labyrinths of the world.

The seven labyrinths referred to the seven highly dangerous locations scattered throughout the world. To the southwest of the Heiligh kingdom, between the capital and the Gruen Desert, lay another one of them, the Great Orcus Labyrinth. The previously mentioned Haltina Woods was also another one of these labyrinths. Though they were called the seven labyrinths, in truth, only three of them had ever been documented. The rest were places that were believed to exist due to evidence provided in ancient books and other such manuscripts.

Though their existence had not been confirmed, they'd still been provisionally marked on maps. The Reisen Gorge that divided the northern and southern continents was one such place, while the Frost Caverns that lay in the Schnee Snow Fields was another potential candidate.

*I probably won't be able to make it across that desert... In that case, the only way I'll ever get to see demi-humans is if I go to the empire and see the slaves they have, but I'm not sure I could bear to see those poor animal ears suffering as slaves.* The empire he'd referred to was the Hoelscher Empire. It was a country that had been formed three hundred years ago, during one of the larger wars between the humans and demons. It had been formed by a certain mercenary group, and was a militaristic country that boasted a large population of adventurers and mercenaries. They held to the doctrine that might makes right, and were a country of rather unsavory repute.

Its citizens believed in using everything they could to further their own ends, whether that meant demi-human slaves or anything else, so the slave trade

flourished there.

The empire lay to the east of the kingdom, and sandwiched between them was the independent merchant republic of Fuhren. As the name suggested, they were a neutral city that didn't rely on either country for support. Being a merchant republic, they boasted a vast amount of wealth, and the flow of money played heavily into their politics. It was also what allowed them to remain neutral. It was said that anything one's heart desired could be bought in that city, such was its economic clout.

*Haaah, but if I ever want to get back home, I can't just run away... Wait, crap, it's almost time for training!* Realizing that he was simply trying to avert his eyes from reality, Hajime shook his head and quickly left the library so as to not be late for training. It was only a short distance from the library to the palace, but the bustle of the capital could be seen even in such a short trek. The voices of merchants hawking their wares mingled with the happy laughter of playing children and the angry scolding of their parents. The capital was a quaint, peaceful city.

*Since it doesn't look like a war's going to break out anytime soon, maybe I can just convince them to send me back...* Hajime dreamed of the impossible as he walked back to the palace. He'd just wanted to avoid thinking about the despair that awaited him once he arrived.

When he arrived at the training grounds, Hajime found a few other students already there, chatting with each other or getting some early practice in. It looked like he had arrived surprisingly early. Hajime decided to pass the time doing a bit of practice of his own, so he took out the slender longsword he'd been given.

As he did, he felt a sudden impact hit him square in the back and he stumbled a few steps forward. He managed to avoid falling, but chills ran down his spine as he saw how close he had been to impaling himself on a drawn sword. He frowned as he turned back and saw the usual group of four all wearing the same obnoxious expression.

As always, Hiyama Daisuke was standing behind him, together with the rest of the Petty Four, as Hajime liked to call them. Ever since they'd started training,

the four of them had taken every opportunity they could to bully Hajime. They were half the reason he found training so depressing, with the other half being how pathetic his stats were.

“Yo, Nagumo. What are you doing? You know that sword’s totally useless in your hands anyway, right? I mean, come on, you’re a total weakling!”

“Hey man, that’s going too far. I mean, you’re totally right though, Hiyama... Gyahaha!”

“Why do you even bother coming to training every day? I’d be way too embarrassed if I were you!”

“Hey, Daisuke. He’s just so pitiful... Don’t you think we should help him out with his training a little?” Hiyama and the others laughed hysterically, as if Shinji had actually said something funny.

“Huh? Come on, Shinji, don’t you think you’re being a bit *too* nice to him? Well, I’m a nice guy too, so I guess I don’t mind helping out.”

“Yeah, that sounds like a great idea. I’m also a super nice guy, so I’ll pitch in. Man, you better thank us, Nagumo. We’re taking out some of our precious time to help out a weakling like you.” They put their arms around Hajime’s shoulders in a false gesture of kindness and dragged him away to an inconspicuous location. Most of his classmates noticed, but they pretended not to see anything.

“Oh no, I’m fine by myself. You don’t have to waste your time on me.” Hajime tried to refuse, though he knew it was pointless.

“Huh!? Here I am going out of my way to train your sorry ass and this is what I get? I can’t believe you! You should be on your knees thanking me!”

As he said that, Hiyama punched Hajime in the side, hard. Hajime groaned in pain as he felt Hiyama’s fist sink into his soft flank. Hiyama’s group had steadily been getting more and more violent with him as of late. While it might’ve been natural for hormone-driven boys in puberty to go mad with power once they got their hands on some, that made it no easier for the one who had to bear the brunt of their lapse in sanity. Though it was not as if there was anything Hajime could do to fight back. All he could do was grit his teeth and try to bear it.

Eventually, they brought him all the way to a secluded corner of the training grounds that couldn't be easily seen, then Hiyama thrust Hajime down to the ground.

"Come on, get up. It's time for some fun training." Hiyama, Nakano, Saitou, and Kondou all surrounded Hajime at those words. Hajime bit his lip in frustration as he stood up.

"Guah!?"

He felt something crash into his back as soon as he rose to his feet. Saitou had hit him with the sheath of his sword. He flew forward, groaning in pain, and was met with another attack.

"Hey now, you can't sleep there. You'll get burned if you do! Incinerate all that stands in my path — Fireball."

Nakano unleashed a fireball at Hajime. As the impact he'd just received made it impossible for him to get back up right away, Hajime frantically rolled to the side, barely avoiding the incoming fireball. However, Saitou had predicted Hajime would dodge, so he'd cast another spell in his direction.

"Rend my foes O wind — Wind Sphere." The clod of hardened wind hit Hajime just as he was getting up, which made him double over in pain as he was blown back. He collapsed to the ground once more, throwing up.

The magic they had cast were all low-level spells with simple incantations. But even weak magic like that hit as hard as a pro boxer's punch. The reason even their weak spells hit so hard was because of their magical affinities combined with the rare artifacts they had received from the king.

"Tch, I can't believe you're so weak. Are you even trying, Nagumo?" Hiyama lazily kicked Hajime in the stomach as he said that. Hajime desperately tried to keep his stomach from emptying itself entirely.

The lynching disguised as "training" continued for a while longer. Hajime bit his lip, cursing his own powerlessness. Maybe he should have fought back, even if he knew he was too weak to truly achieve anything.

But Hajime had always been averse to violence. He even had trouble really hating people. He'd always folded when cornered into a situation that seemed as

if it might devolve into a fight. Always believing that it would end eventually as long as he could put up with it. And that bearing it was always better than fighting back. Some people thought him kind for it, while others simply saw him as a loser. Hajime himself wasn't sure which he was.

Around the time the pain had grown nearly unbearable, Hajime suddenly heard a girl's angry voice.

"What do you think you're doing!?"

Hiyama and the others paled when they heard that voice. It was only natural. After all, it belonged to the girl they were all smitten with, Kaori. And not just her. Shizuku, Kouki, and Ryuutarou were all with her.

"Umm, please don't misunderstand anything. We were just helping Hajime with his training..."

"Nagumo-kun!"

Kaori ignored Hiyama's excuses and ran over to Hajime, who was huddled on the ground, coughing. Hiyama and the others had ceased to matter at all to Kaori when she saw the state Hajime was in.

"Training, huh? Wouldn't you say that was a bit too one-sided to be called training?" Shizuku uttered those words in an icy tone.

"We were just..."

"Save your breath. No matter how unfit for battle Nagumo-kun may be, he's still our classmate. Make sure you don't do it again," Kouki calmly interjected.

"If you've got time to be messing around, then work on your own damn skills instead!" Ryuutarou bellowed.

Hiyama and everyone else started giving different excuses as they smiled awkwardly and beat a hasty retreat. Kaori cast some healing magic in Hajime, and he gradually felt the pain recede.

"T-Thank you, Shirasaki-san. You saved me."

Hajime smiled painfully and Kaori shook her head at his words, her eyes filled with tears.

“Do they always do things like that to you? If so, I’ll...” Kaori glared angrily in the direction Hiyama and the others ran off to, but Hajime hurriedly stopped her.

“No, no, it’s not always this bad! I’m fine, really, so please don’t mind me!”

“But...”

Kaori didn’t seem fully convinced, so Hajime smiled and said “I’m fine, really,” which made Kaori reluctantly give in.

“Nagumo-kun, if anything else happens, please, for Kaori’s sake too, tell us right away.” Shizuku said that with a sidelong glance at Kaori, a strained expression on her face all the while. Hajime was about to thank her for her concern, but the resident hero had to go and ruin the mood.

“But you know, Nagumo, you need to put in some effort of your own. You’ll never grow strong if you keep using your weakness as an excuse. I’ve been hearing that you’re spending all your time in the library when we’re not training. If I was in your shoes, I’d spend every spare moment training to get stronger. I really think you need to start taking this more seriously, Nagumo. Don’t you think Hiyama and the others might have done this because they were trying to fix that frivolous attitude of yours?”

No matter what Hajime did, Kouki always interpreted it like that. Hajime was dumbstruck for a moment before he remembered that Amanogawa-kun was the kind of person who believed that all people were inherently good, and filtered everything he saw through that world view.

To Kouki, it was actually unthinkable on a fundamental level that humans could be so cruel. If that was how he saw everything, then it stood to reason that he believed there was a proper reason behind all cruel acts. “Maybe the problem was with the person they were attacking!” was a natural conclusion to draw with that kind of mindset.

Kouki’s words contained no real ill will. His warnings toward Hajime were actually sincere, in fact. That was why Hajime no longer possessed the strength to even try and correct Kouki. Besides, it was pointless to say anything to someone so convinced of their own righteousness.

Shizuku knew that as well, so she put a hand over her mouth to stifle a sigh before apologizing to Hajime.

“Sorry about that. Kouki at least means well.”

“Ahaha, yeah, I know. Don’t worry about it.” Hajime smiled and replied with the same reassuring words he always did. He slowly stood up, brushing the dust off his clothes.

“Anyway, it’s almost time for training to start. Shall we head back?” They all walked back to the training grounds together at Hajime’s insistence. Kaori kept shooting him worried glances, but Hajime pretended not to notice. As a man, it felt somewhat wrong to let himself be doted on by a girl the same age.

As they returned to the training grounds, Hajime breathed a sigh for the umpteenth time that day. The road ahead certainly looked grim for him.

Normally the students were given free time after training until dinner, but Captain Meld held them back after training had ended on that day. The students all looked at him curiously, and once he had their attention, he proclaimed loudly,

“Tomorrow, as part of your practical training, we will be going on an expedition to the Great Orcus Labyrinth. I’ll prepare all the necessary equipment you guys will need, but don’t think this is going to be anything like the monster hunts you’ve been going on outside the capital! You guys better prepare yourselves! Get as much rest as possible tonight so you’re ready! That’s all, dismissed!” He kept his announcement brief, then left right after he had delivered it.

Hajime stood at the end of the line of chattering students and looked up at the sky. *Very grim indeed.*

The Great Orcus Labyrinth It was a massive dungeon said to span a hundred floors. As it was one of the seven great labyrinths, the deeper one went, the stronger the monsters they faced. Despite the dangers, it was a very popular training spot for adventurers, mercenaries, and new troops alike. The main reasons for that was because it was easy enough to measure the relative strength of the monsters one would have to face based on the floor they were on, and that the mana crystals contained within the monsters were of a higher quality than the ones harvested from monsters on the surface.

A mana crystal was the core of a monster, it was what made a monster a monster. The more powerful a monster, the bigger and purer a mana crystal it held inside. Mana crystals were an important component in magic circles. A magic circle only needed to be drawn to be able to cast the spell inscribed within, but it would have reduced effectiveness without powdered mana crystals used in the engraving of the circle. In fact, it would only be one third as powerful.

Mana crystals allowed for more efficient transferral of mana, which was why they improved effectiveness so much. In addition, most commonplace magical tools used mana crystals as a power source. Because they were used by the common folk and not just the military, mana crystals were always in rather high demand.

However, monsters that possessed high quality mana crystals were also capable of using powerful specialized magic. It was specialized because while they had large quantities of mana, monsters were incapable of using magic circles or chants, meaning that they could only ever use a single type of spell. Still, being able to unleash that spell without needing a magic circle or spell aria was a powerful asset. It was the number one reason one could never let their guard down when fighting a monster.

Hajime and the others arrived in the outpost town of Horaud, together with Captain Meld and a few of his knights. It was a small town that primarily existed to service the adventurers who traveled there wishing to challenge the Great Orcus Labyrinth. As the labyrinth was also used as a training arena for new

soldiers, the kingdom maintained a state-run inn at the town, which was where the students were all staying.

Hajime was glad to see a normal room for once, and happily dived into his bed with a relieved sigh. Every other room had at least two people in it, but Hajime had one all for himself.

“Wow, lucky me,” Hajime muttered, somewhat disappointed. He did feel a little lonely being in a room alone, after all.

Tomorrow they would all enter the labyrinth. The plan was to go no further than floor twenty, which according to Captain Meld was still high enough that the knights would be able to protect him. All Hajime could say in response were apologies for how much of a burden he was. He honestly would’ve preferred if they left him behind and went on by themselves... but he didn’t have the courage to say that to Captain Meld, considering the atmosphere and all.

Hajime started reading the picture book he had borrowed that described some of the monsters that inhabited the lower levels of the dungeon. After a while, however, he decided he would need as much rest as he could get, so he planted himself down in bed despite the early hour. The skills he’d developed in school to allow him to sleep in any situation still worked even in another world.

But just as he was dozing off, he heard a knock on his door that broke him out of his stupor. Though he had mentioned it was still a little early, that had meant early for him, who was used to pulling back to back all-nighters. It was actually quite late for the people of Tortus. Suspecting the unexpected late night visitor might be Hiyama and the others, Hajime tensed up. However, his fears vanished when he heard the voice on the other side of the door.

“Nagumo-kun, are you awake? It’s me, Shirasaki. Can we talk for a bit?”

*What on earth?* Hajime stiffened up for a second before hurriedly rushing over to the door. He quickly unbolted and opened his door. Standing on the other side was Kaori, wearing nothing but a cardigan over her pure white negligee.

“...What in tarnation?”

“Huh?” Hajime was so shocked that he unintentionally slipped into an odd accent for a moment there. Kaori looked at him blankly, so she must not have heard him right.

Hajime composed himself as best he could and asked what she wanted while trying to avoid looking at her as much as possible. As much of a 2D advocate as he might’ve been, Hajime was still a teenage boy. Kaori’s appearance was a bit too stimulating for him.

“Ah, umm, it’s nothing. Anyway, what’s up? Do you have a message for me or something?”

“No. I was hoping we could talk for a bit, Nagumo-kun... But I guess I’m being a bother, aren’t I?”

“...Come on in.” Hajime asked what he thought was the most likely reason for Kaori’s appearance, but she bluntly refused and gave a most unexpected reply. And she had asked him with such pleading puppy dog eyes too. The combination was super effective! Before he knew it, Hajime had already thrown the door wide and invited Kaori in.

“Thanks!” Kaori happily stepped inside without any hesitation, then sat down at the table by the window.

Still somewhat confused, Hajime began reflexively brewing her some tea. Brewing might have been a bit of an overstatement, however, as it was just some crappy black tea he made by dumping some teabags into a pot of water. He made enough tea for the both of them and offered Kaori a cup. Once the tea had been served, he sat down across from her.

“Thank you.” Despite the terrible quality of the tea, Kaori still accepted it graciously. She gently brought the cup to her lips, and the moonlight illuminated her figure as she did. Her black hair glowed faintly in the silver light, wreathing her in a halo. She looked almost like an angel.

Hajime stared, captivated in a purely platonic manner by her mysterious aura. He finally returned to his senses after Kaori put the cup down with a clink. In an attempt to calm himself down, Hajime downed his cup of crappy black tea in one big gulp. He choked a little as the deluge of liquid poured down his throat. Well, that was rather embarrassing.

Kaori chuckled as she saw him sputter. In order to distract himself from the embarrassment, Hajime quickly started talking.

“So, what was it you wanted to talk to me about? The dungeon trip tomorrow?” Kaori nodded in affirmation, and her smile was replaced by an unbelievably grave expression.

“I want you... to stay here when we go to the labyrinth tomorrow. I’ll convince the instructors and the rest of our classmates, so please, don’t go!” Kaori grew more and more heated as she spoke, and by the end she was leaning forward into Hajime, pleading with him.

For his part, Hajime was utterly bewildered. She seemed a bit too desperate to be someone who just wanted him out of the way because he would be a burden.

“Umm... I do realize I’d just get in your way, but... I don’t think they’ll let me skip out after I’ve come this far already.”

“That’s not it! It’s not because I think you’re a burden or anything!” Kaori hurriedly tried to correct Hajime’s misunderstanding. Realizing she’d gotten a bit too heated, she placed a hand on her chest and took a deep breath. After calming herself down, she softly muttered “I’m sorry,” and began talking once more.

“Umm, you see, I just have this really bad feeling. I was sleeping just a moment ago, and... I was having this dream... You were in it, Nagumo-kun... but you wouldn’t answer even when I called your name... and no matter how much I ran, I could never reach you... Then at the end...” Kaori faltered, afraid to say what happened next, but Hajime calmly pushed her to continue.

“And then at the end?”

Kaori bit her lip and looked up at Hajime with tears in her eyes.

“...You vanished...”

“I see...”

Silence filled the room. Hajime stared at Kaori, who was hanging her head again. That certainly sounded like a sinister dream. But in the end, it was still just a nightmare. Hajime doubted he could get permission to stay behind for a flimsy

reason like that, and even if he could, his classmates would have all condemned him for it. Regardless of how it turned out, he would've had nowhere left to go if he asked. Which was why, sadly, Hajime had no choice but to go.

He spoke as gently as he could, trying his best to reassure Kaori.

"It was just a dream, Shirasaki-san. We'll have Captain Meld's veteran knights with us, along with some ridiculously strong people like Amanogawa-kun. Or rather, a ton, since all of our classmates have pretty broken skills. So much so that I actually pity our enemies a little. You probably just had that kind of dream because you've been seeing just how weak I am up close recently." Hajime's words only seemed to make Kaori even more worried

"And... And if you're still worried..."

"Then what?" Hajime felt a little embarrassed, but he still looked Kaori in the eyes, then muttered—

"Why don't you protect me?"

"Eh?"

Hajime realized that it was embarrassing for a man to ask such a thing of a girl. In fact, he was blushing bright red from how embarrassed he felt. The moon was shining bright, so the inside of the room was lit well enough that Kaori must've easily been able to see how red he was as well.

"Your job was Priest, right, Shirasaki-san? That's a job that excels in healing magic, isn't it? So no matter what happens to me... even if I get mortally wounded, you should be able to heal me, Shirasaki-san. So will you protect me, please? That way I'll be fine no matter what happens." Kaori stared at Hajime for a long time after hearing his words. Hajime knew he couldn't turn his eyes away in a situation like that, so he held Kaori's gaze despite nearly dying from the embarrassment of what he'd just said.

Hajime had once heard that people's worst fear was the unknown. At the moment, Kaori was scared because she didn't know what it was that was going to attack Hajime. So even if it was just for her own peace of mind, Hajime wanted to give her the confidence that she could handle anything that came at him, regardless of what it was.

Kaori and Hajime stared at each other for a few moments, but she finally broke the silence with a smile.

“You never change, do you, Nagumo-kun?”

“Huh?” Hajime tilted his head quizzically at Kaori’s words, and Kaori chuckled at his confusion.

“Nagumo-kun, you met me for the first time in high school, right? But you know, I’ve known you since the second year of middle school.”

Hajime’s eyes went as wide as dinner plates when he heard that. He racked his brain, trying to remember where he had met her before, but turned up blank. Kaori chuckled again when she saw him groaning to himself.

“I knew you, but you didn’t know me... I first saw you when you were kneeling on the ground, so it’s natural you didn’t see me.”

“K-Kneeling!?”

She saw him in such a pathetic state!? Hajime squirmed in embarrassment for a totally different reason when he heard that. Frantically, he tried to remember where he could’ve possibly kneeled like that in public. Kaori continued her tale while Hajime went through a pantomime of weird expressions.

“Yep. You were prostrating yourself in front of a bunch of delinquents. You didn’t stop even when they spat on you, or poured juice on you... or even stepped on you. Eventually they just gave up and left.”

“S-Sorry you had to see something so unsightly...”

Hajime wished he could just melt into the floor. That was almost as bad as having someone’s angsty teenage middle school past brought up again. He could only smile weakly. It was the same awkward smile he’d had when his mom had found his porn collection and neatly organized it on his shelf.

However, Kaori’s looked at him kindly, with not an ounce of scorn in her gaze.

“That’s not true. It wasn’t unsightly at all. In fact, when I saw it, I thought you were a really strong and kind person, Nagumo-kun.”

“...Huh?” Hajime couldn’t believe what he had just heard. Certainly didn’t seem like the proper impression to get from watching a scene like that. *Don’t tell*

*me Shirasaki-san has some kind of weird fetish for that!?* Hajime thought, rather rudely.

“I mean, you did all that for the sake of a little boy and his grandmother, didn’t you, Nagumo-kun?”

At those words, Hajime finally remembered. Something like that had indeed happened during his middle school days.

A little kid had bumped into some delinquents and the takoyaki he’d been eating had spilled over their clothes. The guys he had bumped into all snapped, and the boy started crying while his grandmother cowered in a corner. It had been quite the scene.

Hajime was just passing by at the time, and he’d planned on ignoring the commotion. However, even after the boy’s grandmother gave the delinquents some money, most likely as an apology for ruining the shirt, they continued harassing them. In fact, they got even worse and by the end of it just snatched the poor lady’s wallet right out of her hands. It was at that point that Hajime’s body had moved instinctively.

But of course, he was someone who hated violence. The only killer moves he knew were the cringey ones he practiced at home after watching action shows. So he did the only thing he could, prostrate himself before them and beg for mercy. It was, of course, unbelievably embarrassing for him, but also surprisingly embarrassing to the ones he was kneeling to. In fact, it was so embarrassing that they couldn’t stand it. And as planned, the delinquents did eventually just leave.

“It’s easy for strong people to solve things with violence. People like Kouki-kun can easily fling themselves into trouble and just fight their way out of it... but few people who’re weak have the courage to stand up for others, and even fewer could bow down like that for someone else... You know, I was always scared back then... I always made excuses for not helping other people by telling myself things like ‘I’m not strong like Shizuku-chan,’ so when I got in trouble, I always waited for other people to come save me instead.”

“Shirasaki-san...”

“That’s why I think you’re really the strongest out of everyone here, Nagumo-kun. I was really happy when I saw you again in high school, you know... I wanted

to become more like you. I wanted to talk to you more, to learn more about you. Though you always just fell asleep whenever you were at school...”

“Ahaha, sorry about that.” Since he’d finally realized why Kaori always hung around him, and why she held him in such high regard, Hajime blushed and smiled awkwardly.

“That might be why I’m so worried. You might do something reckless again for someone else’s sake, Nagumo-kun. Just like you did when you took on those delinquents... but fine.” She gazed at Hajime resolutely.

“I’ll protect you, Nagumo-kun.”

Hajime looked Kaori in the eyes, then nodded, accepting her resolve.

“Thank you.”

Hajime smiled bitterly at the exchange Their roles as boy and girl had been completely reversed. Though Hajime had to admit, Kaori made for a great hero. That would’ve made Hajime the heroine, though. As a guy, he wasn’t quite sure how to feel about that, so all he could do was smile.

They chatted for a while longer, and then Kaori went back to her room. When Hajime finally sunk down into his bed, his mind was working furiously. He had to find something he could do at all costs, and rid himself of the “worthless” stigma. He couldn’t stay the protected princess forever. Hajime renewed his resolve as he drifted off to sleep.

Kaori had returned to her own room after leaving Hajime’s. A figure hidden in the shadows watched as she left his room and headed to her own. No one was there to see... when his face twisted into a horrifying expression.

The next morning, everyone reported to the plaza that served as the entrance to the Great Orcus Labyrinth early enough that the sun had still yet to rise.

The students were all filled with equal parts trepidation and curiosity. Hajime, however, had a more complicated expression on his face. He was also somewhat excited and nervous about his first excursion into a dungeon, but when he saw what the entrance to the Great Orcus Labyrinth looked like, some of his excitement faded.

What Hajime had expected was the standard cavern entrance leading into unknown dark depths. However, the sight that greeted him was something that looked more akin to the entrance to a museum, complete with its own receptionist counter. A girl in uniform was checking over the people going in and out of the labyrinth with a smile. It appeared that everyone's status plate was checked at the entrance. That way, the number of casualties could be accurately tallied. With the threat of war looming overhead, the government wanted to avoid losing too many men, so they implemented that policy as one of their countermeasures.

Numerous stalls were lined up on the plaza surrounding the entrance, the merchants all competing with each other to show off their wares. It felt almost like a festival.

Shallower labyrinths that didn't have as many floors were popular with merchants, since people naturally gathered there. The people present ranged from boisterous adventurers who talked big but quickly lost their lives in the labyrinth, to criminals who operated out of back alleys and other unsavory locations. As the government was preparing for war, they didn't want to waste too many resources handling those problems, so they cooperated with the local adventurer's guild to keep the area safe. People were selling their wares all the way up to the receptionist's desk at the entrance, which in a sense made life easier for the adventurers who were setting out into the labyrinth's depths.

Hajime pulled himself together and scratched his head as he looked around, seeing all of the other students gawking like country bumpkins as they followed Captain Meld in single file, like a row of little ducklings.

Once inside, the lively atmosphere that had surrounded them mere moments ago vanished. In front of them was a passage that was a little over five meters wide. Though there was no obvious light source, the entire labyrinth was dimly lit, enough that one could vaguely make out their surroundings without the help of a torch or magical item. In truth, the passages were all lit by a special mineral called green glowstone that was buried in the walls. The entire Great Orcus Labyrinth was actually an excavated vein of green glowstone ore.

The party all filed into ranks and slowly advanced through the labyrinth. After a few uneventful minutes, the passage they were walking down opened up into a

wide plaza.

Towering seven or eight meters above them was a dome shaped ceiling. The students were all looking around curiously, when suddenly a number of gray creatures resembling furballs burst out from cracks in the wall.

“Alright, Kouki, your team’s up front! Everyone else fall back! I’ll have you switch in after some time, so stay sharp! These monsters are called Ratmen! They’re quick on their feet, but not all that strong. Keep your cool as you fight!”

As Captain Meld had said, the Ratmen were quite fast, and rushed at them with alarming agility. Pairs of dark red eyes gleamed with a ghastly light from within the balls of fur. Their name was rather fitting, as they looked like giant, muscular rats... that stood on two feet. Only the area around their corded chests and impressive eight-packs was bereft of fur, almost as if they were trying to show them off.

Kouki’s group, who were facing them head on, all grimaced when they got a better look—especially Shizuku, who was standing up front. They certainly did look disgusting.

Once the Ratmen entered into range, Kouki, Shizuku, and Ryuutarou all attacked at once. In the meantime, Kaori and two of her close female friends, the glasses wearing Eri Nakamura and the childish and energetic Suzu Taniguchi, started chanting their spells. They were preparing their magic already. That was the basic formation they’d practiced during training.

Kouki swung his bastard sword faster than the eye could follow, and slaughtered a score of them with his first swing. His sword was one of the artifacts that had been resting in the Heiligh treasury, and had the rather cliched name of “The Holy Sword.” It was blessed with the light element, which had the sickeningly efficient properties of simultaneously weakening enemies that were hit by the light it emitted, while also increasing one’s own physical strength. It sure played dirty for a “holy” sword.

Ryuutarou, on the other hand, had the job of Monk, which was a martial arts class that fought with its fists. He was equipped with a pair of gauntlets and greaves. Those were also artifacts, and were capable of unleashing enchanted shockwaves. They were also unbreakable. Ryuutarou took up a stance and

splendidly beat down any enemy that came close with punches and kicks, not letting a single one pass. Despite being practically bare-handed, his massive frame made him seem like an armored heavy knight.

Shizuku, meanwhile, possessed the job of Swordsman, which was fitting for a samurai-esque girl like her. She wielded a blade that was midway between a katana and a shamshir, and made short work of any enemies that got within reach of her sword with her quick-draw skills. She had refined her swordplay even further since arriving in Tortus, and had even earned the admiration of many of the knights. While everyone was busy watching Kouki and the others fight, the girls in the back line finished their chants.

“Flames blacker than pitch, swirl about thine enemies! Burn until naught but their ashes remain, Spiral Blaze!”

They cast the spell in unison, and huge a whirlwind of flames enveloped the Ratmen, burning them to a crisp. The Ratmen screeched in pain, flailing wildly until the flames pouring down on them reduced to them to ash. In the blink of an eye, all of the Ratmen had been annihilated. The other students didn’t even get a chance to fight. It looked like monsters on the first floor were far too weak to even put up a fight against Kouki’s party.

“Wow, well done! Alright, the rest of you will be up next, so don’t relax just yet!”

Captain Meld reminded the class not to let their guard down, though he was smiling, impressed at their prowess. Still, he couldn’t prevent the students for getting pumped up about their first dungeon monster elimination expedition. He shrugged his shoulders helplessly as he saw the students breaking out into smiles.

“Oh, and... while you don’t have to worry about it this time since it’s training, in the future try and kill your enemies in a way that preserves their mana crystals. What you did back there was overkill.”

Kaori and the others blushed at captain Meld’s words, realizing they may have gone too far. From then on, the class smoothly advanced through the floors of the labyrinth, rotating the vanguard between battles.

Eventually, they arrived at the twentieth floor, the floor that separated skilled

adventurers from rank amateurs. Currently, the deepest floor people had managed to reach was floor sixty-five. However, that was a legendary feat that hadn't been replicated since, so in recent times anyone who made it past the first twenty floors was considered a highly skilled fighter. Anyone who made it past the first forty was superhuman.

With Kouki at their head, the students were able to easily advance through the floors. Though they had little combat experience, their overpowered abilities more than compensated. The most dangerous enemy the students faced was actually the traps scattered about. Some of them were even lethal.

The most common countermeasure for traps was something known as a Fair Scope. A Fair Scope was a handy tool that detected traps by reading the flow of mana. Most of the traps in the labyrinth were magical in nature, so a Fair Scope detected around 80% of them. However, the Scope possessed a very limited range, so it was only effective in the hands of an experienced user.

Therefore, the real reason Hajime and the others were able to descend so smoothly was because of how well their knight mentors were guiding them. Captain Meld also often reminded the students to never enter a room that hadn't been scoured for traps first.

"Alright everyone, from this point on, monsters won't come at you just one species at a time. They'll coordinate with each other and attack in large groups. Don't let your guard down just because we've had nothing but easy victories so far! Today's training will conclude once we clear the twentieth floor, so let's end things with a bang!" Captain Meld's voice echoed throughout the room.

Up until that point, Hajime hadn't done much of anything. He'd once taken on a monster the knights had weakened for him, trapping it in a pitfall and stabbing it to death with his sword, but that was all.

Essentially, he had just spent his time standing by in the rear protected by the knights, without being able to join anyone's party. It was honestly rather pathetic. However, using his skills in combat helped increase his magic stat, so it wasn't completely useless. Hajime's magic stat grew enough to raise him two levels, so the combat practice had helped some.

*But man, I totally feel like a leecher for doing this. Haaah...* The knights sent

another weakened monster Hajime‘s way, and he approached it with a sigh, placing his hands on the ground to transmute the earth around it. He immobilized it in a pitfall on the off chance that it might still pose a threat, then skewered it with his sword.

*Well, at least my transmutation skills are growing a little... I’ll just have to keep at it.* Hajime swallowed a mana pill and wiped the sweat off his brow. He didn’t notice that the knights were all staring at him in admiration.

In truth, the knights hadn’t been expecting much of anything from Hajime. They were just having such an easy time of it that they decided to send a few monsters over to him, since he’d seemed so bored. Weakened, of course.

They’d all thought he would just flail his sword around helplessly for a bit. However, he had effectively used his transmutation skill to immobilize the enemy before dispatching it, a tactic the knights had never seen before. They had assumed Synergists were only good for blacksmithing, hence their belief that their skills would be useless in combat.

Hajime only had his single transmutation skill, so he had trained it diligently, assuming that his ability to transmute ore could extend to the earth as well. It had worked, but with how difficult it was for him to take down a single weakened monster, and how strong everyone around him was, he still thought himself weak.

That was the first time he’d shown this ability to people. He’d made an utter fool of himself during their previous excursion to slay monsters outside of the capital, and this was the solution he had come up with.

While he was taking a short break, Hajime glanced over to the front lines, and his eyes met Kaori’s. She was smiling at him. She had taken her promise to “protect” him quite seriously, and Hajime looked away, embarrassed, as he realized she had been watching over him the whole time. Kaori pouted a little when she saw him look away. Shizuku chuckled softly as she watched their little exchange out of the corner of her eye, then softly spoke.

“Kaori, why do you keep staring at Nagumo-kun? Don’t you know it’s wrong to pick up guys in a dungeon?” Shizuku said that in a teasing manner, but Kaori blushed, and angrily rounded on Shizuku.

“Oh, come on, Shizuku-chan! Could you please not say strange things like that! I was just wondering if Nagumo-kun was okay!”

*That’s basically you trying to pick him up then, isn’t it?* Shizuku thought, but not wanting to make Kaori sulk, she decided to keep quiet. Still, she was unable to hide the mirth in her eyes, and Kaori just pouted and said “Jeez” when she saw Shizuku’s expression.

Hajime had been watching their little exchange when he felt someone’s gaze on him and reflexively straightened up. It was a glare dripping with hatred. He was used to getting such gazes from his classmates, but the intensity packed in that one was on a completely different level.

That wasn’t the first time he had felt this gaze either. He’d felt it multiple times since that morning, but whenever he tried to look for the one who was doing it, they seemingly calmed down. Hajime was growing tired of it.

*What’s going on...? Did I do something to someone? Though all I’ve been doing is trying my best despite my incompetence... Wait, could that be the reason? Maybe they’re thinking “the hell do you think you’re playing at, acting like you can be helpful!?” or something...*

“Haaah...” Hajime sighed deeply. He had started to think there might’ve been some wisdom in heeding Kaori’s warning.

The class continued exploring the twentieth floor.

Each of the labyrinth’s floors spanned a few kilometers in every direction, and new floors usually took a team of dozens anywhere from half a month to a month to fully search and map out.

However, at present, all the floors until the forty-seventh had been mapped out, so they were in no danger of getting lost. Nor should they have been in any danger of falling into a trap.

The deepest room in the twentieth floor was like a limestone cave, but made of ice. Icicles protruded from the walls, some of them melted, creating a complex topography. The stairs leading to the twenty-first floor was just past it.

Once they made it that far, their training for the day would be over. Sadly, while teleportation magic had existed during the Age of the Gods, it no longer

did, so they had to walk back to the entrance. The students had already begun to relax when a protrusion in the wall had prevented them from advancing in formation, forcing them to continue in single file.

Eventually, the two people at the head of their procession, Kouki and Captain Meld, came to a halt. Puzzled, the students prepared for battle as they looked around. It seemed they had encountered a monster.

“It’s camouflaging itself! Keep a close eye on your surroundings!” Captain Meld yelled out a warning to everyone.

An instant later, the thing everyone had mistaken for a protrusion suddenly changed color and began to move. The creature that had assumed the shape of a wall was actually a dark brown color, and it stood there on two legs. It began beating its chest. Seemed the monster was a gorilla that could camouflage itself like a chameleon.

“A Rockmount! Watch out for its arms, they pack quite a punch!” Captain Meld’s voice resounded throughout the cavern as Kouki’s party prepared to engage the enemy.

Ryuutarou repelled the Rockmount’s enormous arms with his fists. Meanwhile, Kouki and Shizuku shuffled to either side to flank it, but were unable to properly surround it because of the rough terrain.

Realizing it couldn’t get past the human wall that was Ryuutarou, the Rockmount fell back and sucked in a deep breath.

“Graaaaaaaaaaah!!!” Seconds later, it looked back and roared so ferociously that the entire room shook.

“Guh!?” “Uwaaah!?” “Kyaaah!?” Though the shockwave of sound that hit the students did no harm, it made everyone stiffen in fear. That was the magic Rockmounts were capable of using, “Intimidating Roar.“ It was a mana infused roar that could temporarily paralyze all who heard it.

Kouki and the others, who took it head on, found themselves unable to move an inch. They expected to be attacked while stunned, but the Rockmount sidestepped past them, picked up a nearby boulder, and hurled it at Kaori’s group. And what a spectacular throw it was! It flew cleanly over the heads of the

immobile front line and headed straight toward its intended target.

They all pointed their magic circle-amplified staves at the boulder and prepared to intercept. There was no space to dodge.

However, they stopped their chant midway, the sight of what was coming toward them shocking them into inaction.

The boulder the Rockmount had thrown was a second Rockmount! It somersaulted in the air and spread its arms wide, heading straight for Kaori. The way it spread its arms out resembled the Rupin Dive. The resemblance was so uncanny that one almost expected it to scream “Kaori-chaaaan!” as it hit her. It even had the bloodshot eyes and heavy breathing down pat. Kaori, Eri, and Suzu all screamed in terror and forgot to keep chanting.

“Oy, what do you think you’re doing in the middle of a fight!?” Captain Meld swiftly cut down the Rockmount that was diving toward the girls.

They all quickly apologized, but that must’ve been quite the disgusting sight to see, as their faces were still pale. A certain someone completely snapped when he saw how rattled the girls were. Amanogawa Kouki, the class’s resident self-styled hero of justice.

“Bastard... How dare you hurt Kaori and the others... I won’t forgive you!” He must have mistakenly thought their paleness came from their close brush with death, and not how disgustingly creepy the Rockmount had looked.

*How dare you frighten a girl like that!* Kouki flew into a rage over that rather cliched reason. Pure white mana began leaking from his body, and almost as if in response, his holy sword began to glow.

“Soar unto heaven, O divine wings! Celestial Flash”

“No, stop, you idiot!” Kouki ignored Captain Meld, raised his sword up high, and swung down with all his might.

He finished chanting his spell the same instant, and his holy sword unleashed a dazzling blade of light. There was no escaping it. The curved light passed through the Rockmount with only the slightest hint of resistance, cutting it cleanly in two, and stopped only after crashing into the wall.

There was a loud rumbling, and pieces of the wall began to rain down. Kouki breathed a deep sigh, then turned to the girls, a lady killer smile on his face. He had defeated the big bad monster for them. Just as he was about to say “It’s okay now!” Captain Meld, who was smiling angrily with veins popping out of his forehead, walked up to him and delivered a punch.

“Hobwah!?”

“You damn fool! I understand why you got angry, but you can’t use skills like that in a narrow passage! You could’ve brought the whole cave down on us!” Kouki’s complaints died in his throat at Captain Meld’s chastising words, and he apologized awkwardly. The girls all smiled wryly and tried to comfort him.

Then suddenly, Kaori turned to look at the crumbled section of the wall.

“...What is that? It’s all sparkly...” At her words, everyone turned to look in the direction she was pointing.

There was a strange mineral emitting a pale blue glow, protruding from the wall like a flower in bloom. It looked like a crystal with Indigolite buried in its center. All of the girls, including Kaori, were entranced by the beauty of the gem.

“Oh, that’s a glanz crystal. And a pretty big one to boot. How rare,” Captain Meld said.

Glanz crystals were basically a type of raw gemstone. Though they held no special properties, their luster and radiance made them popular among the noble ladies and their daughters. They were often processed into rings, earrings, pendants, and such other jewelry to be given as gifts. Apparently most girls were overjoyed to receive glanz jewelry as gifts. It was among the top three jewels used in proposal rings.

“That sounds so lovely...” Kaori blushed when she heard Captain Meld’s explanation, and was further entranced by the stone. She then stole a glance at Hajime. It was so quick that it almost went unnoticed. However, Shizuku and one other person most definitely did take note.

“In that case, I’ll go grab it for us!” Hiyama suddenly ran forward after saying that. He swiftly climbed up the debris of the crumbled wall, heading toward the glanz crystal as fast as possible. Captain Meld hurriedly tried to stop him.

“Hey! Don’t just run off on your own! We’re not even sure it’s safe yet!” However, Hiyama pretended not to hear, and he was standing in front of the crystal before long .

Captain Meld chased after Hiyama in an attempt to stop him. At the same time, one of the knights pulled out his Fair Scope and scanned the area around the crystal. A moment later, his face went pale.

“Captain! It’s a trap!”

“What!? Stop!” However, both Captain Meld and the knight’s warning arrived a moment too late.

The second Hiyama touched it, a magic circle appeared in the center of the crystal. The trap had been set for anyone foolish enough to touch the glanz crystal. “If it seems too good to be true, then it probably is.” That was one of the world’s golden rules.

The magic circle glowed bright, then grew large enough to encompass the entire room. It was just like the day they had been summoned.

“Crap, retreat! Everyone get out, now!” Captain Meld’s words spurred everyone into action, and they all scrambled for the exit... but they didn’t make it in time.

Light filled the room, and before long white was the only thing anyone could see. Everyone was assailed by a momentary sensation of weightlessness.

Hajime and the others could feel the atmosphere shift. A moment later, they all fell to the ground with a thud.

Hajime groaned in pain as he felt his aching butt, then looked around. Most of his other classmates were still on the ground, but Captain Meld and his knights, along with Kouki and the other vanguard fighters, were already on their feet, examining their surroundings.

The magic circle from earlier must have contained a teleportation spell. Magic from The Age of the Gods was remarkable because it could easily do things that no modern-day mage could.

Hajime and the others had been teleported onto a massive stone bridge. It was

around one hundred meters in length. The ceiling also towered a full twenty meters above them. Below the bridge was not a river, but instead a dark abyss with no visible end. The gaping chasm resembled the very pits of hell.

Though the bridge was ten meters wide, it had no railing at all, so if someone slipped, there would be nothing to catch their fall. Hajime and the others had been sent to the middle of the bridge. One side of the bridge was a passage heading further in, while stairs leading upward were at the other end.

After confirming the situation, Captain Meld curtly barked out orders.

“Everyone, get up and head for the stairs! Now!” His voice boomed louder than thunder, and the students hurried to follow his orders.

However, labyrinth’s traps were not so easy to escape. They would not be allowed to retreat so easily.

New magic circles suddenly appeared on either side of the bridge, accompanied by a swirling torrent of dark red mana. The magic circle on the passage-side of the bridge was ten meters long. The ones on the stairs-side were only one meter each, but there were many.

The dark red magic circles resembled pools of blood, and gave off an ominous feel. They pulsed once, and waves of monsters began pouring forth.

From the countless magic circles near the stairs came a horde of skeletons wielding swords, Traum Soldiers. Their empty eye sockets gleamed with the same blood-red light as the circles they came from, and they rolled around like real eyes too. Within seconds, the stairs were teeming with nearly a hundred of the creatures, and more were still pouring out.

Despite their numbers, Hajime thought what was coming out on the passage-side of the bridge was far more of a threat.

From within the ten meter long magic circle emerged a monster as big as the circle that summoned it. It stood on four legs and had some kind of helmet on its head. To Hajime, the closest thing it resembled was a triceratops. However, unlike a triceratops, its eyes glowed bright red, and as it clacked its wicked sharp claws and fangs together, flames sprouted from the horn on its helmeted forehead.

Everyone stared at it in slack-jawed horror, and Captain Meld's terrified whisper resounded surprisingly clearly throughout the room.

"Oh my god... It's... a Behemoth..."